

A life altered, not broken

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Pete Herrick has come home from Iraq, broken in body but not in spirit.

In May 2004, the 37-year-old Fort White resident was serving with the Naval Mobile Construction Battalion, NMCB 14, when his unit was caught in a mortar attack. Of 43 men who were gathered in the motor pool that day, five were killed and 33 wounded.

Herrick had multiple wounds to his right arm and leg; his left leg had to be amputated. One piece of shrapnel lodged in his lung. Another caught him in the neck, damaging his spinal cord and leaving him paralyzed from the neck down.

Seated in a motorized wheelchair, his immobile fingers wrapped around two rolled washcloths, Pete Herrick will tell you he's a lucky man.

By all rights, he'll say, his injuries should have killed him.

"Almost every single morning, I wake up with a smile on my face," he said.

Officials with the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System point out that Herrick - and thousands of other combat veterans who were wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan - are alive today because sophisticated medical technology has been brought to the combat zone. A critically injured soldier can be whisked to a field hospital for emergency treatment, then to a military hospital in the United States in under 36 hours.

As a result, more of the wounded are surviving the war in Iraq than any other conflict in U.S. history. In the first Gulf War, 24 percent of the American service personnel wounded in combat died of their injuries. In Iraq and Afghanistan, that figure is less than 10 percent, according to a report in the New England Journal of Medicine.

That's good news, but it also means that those like Herrick, who come home with very serious injuries, will require aggressive medical care and real work by their families to keep them alive.

Karen Myers coordinates the Seamless Transition task force created to serve area veterans returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. She figures 8,600 servicemen and servicewomen in the North Florida/South Georgia portion of the Veterans Health System have served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Only one in eight has enrolled for the health care benefits to which they are entitled.

For those, like Herrick, who have suffered life-altering injuries, Myers pledges, "There will be no 'no' in getting them what they need."

Shipping out

When Herrick joined the Navy reserves in 2001, he never pictured life as he's living it today.

A self-employed, highly-skilled carpenter, he and his wife, Diana, moved from the Tarpon Springs area into a doublewide mobile home on five acres in Fort White, just to escape the traffic and growth.

The two have been together since meeting in Tarpon Springs High School. They married in 1986 and have a 19-year-old daughter who is a student at Santa Fe Community College. Their 15-year-old son, Drew, is at home.

When her husband said he was planning to join the reserves at the age of 34, Diana Herrick said she thought he

was having a mid-life crisis.

But a buddy was already in the reserves, and Herrick figured it would be a good way to supplement his income from construction and provide some security for his family. After all, he said, the world was safer than it had ever been. That was six weeks before 9-11, when the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon changed the world in an instant.

Herrick's unit, which is based at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville but includes members from across the South, was mobilized on March 1, 2004. Herrick left for Gulfport, Miss., where he received a month of training.

On April 1, he found himself "boots on the ground" in Kuwait. Next he was sent to Ramadi, a hot zone just north of Falluja.

"Wonderful little area," Herrick recalls, tongue firmly in cheek. "I think tourism is their specialty."

About 70 miles west of Baghdad, Ramadi has been a focal point of resistance to the presence of the United States in Iraq. Herrick's Seabee unit was assigned to convoy men and materials between bases, wherever they were needed for reconstruction. That's what they were doing on May 2.

"We had just come back from a mission," he recalled. "We were still in the motor pool area at the base when the mortar round hit."

Herrick and Jeffery Blackmon, a 43-year-old from Kingsland, Ga., were the most critically hurt.

"I'm not sure what happened immediately after I was wounded," Herrick said. "For the next five days, I pretty much left the planet. When I woke up, I was in Bethesda Naval Hospital with my family around me."

Coming home

Diana Herrick and Pete's father, Clint, sketch a picture of those missing days.

Herrick was taken to Baghdad, where surgeons tried to save his left leg. Then he was flown aboard an airborne intensive-care unit to the military medical center in Landstuhl, Germany. Some 25,000 patients from Afghanistan and Iraq have passed through the doors of the 150-bed hospital there. Once stabilized, they are sent on to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., or Bethesda Naval Hospital in nearby Maryland.

Herrick lost his leg in Landstuhl. Then he was flown on to Bethesda, attached to a mechanical ventilator that allowed him to breathe.

Diana said that she had resolved not to watch the television news while Pete was in Iraq. Two days after her husband was wounded, however, something made her turn on the TV, just in time to catch a report about the attack on his unit.

"My heart was pounding because they didn't say who'd been hurt," she said.

Then came a phone call from Germany, to "update" her on her husband's condition. She hadn't even been told that he was among the wounded. The picture the medical team sketched of his injuries was grim.

Diana and Clint Herrick prepared to fly to Bethesda with the children.

"I didn't have the feeling that I wouldn't get there in time to see him alive, but other than that, I wasn't sure," she said.

Clint Herrick describes the scene when they arrived: "Pete was quite a sight. Couldn't talk, and his whole body was swelled up. He had a fresh amputation, and tubes sprouting from all over his body."

Herrick's father said the trip to his son's side changed his life.

Clint Herrick is one of seven brothers who grew up in Maine, none of whom had ever served in a war.

"I didn't imagine a day when Herrick blood would be shed," Clint said. "Because of Pete, I'm now a member of the men's auxiliary of the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars)."

The trip brought another change in Clint.

"I went up there an atheist, but I came back a Christian. The Lord blessed me, and now I want to talk about what happened to Pete, and what happened to me."

Pete Herrick said his father, who would have been drafted for Vietnam if he hadn't already had two children, wasn't happy when his son decided to enlist.

"I think he's real proud now," he added. "I wouldn't change a thing if I could . . . and I wouldn't do it any different."

Return to Florida

The next stop on Herrick's journey was Tampa, where he was transferred to the spinal cord and brain injury center at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center.

Heather Gleason, a social worker based at Gainesville's VA Medical Center, works closely with the Tampa program.

"We want to get involved to ensure that all the coordinated services are in place the day a guy like Pete comes home," Gleason said.

The VA has designated four lead "polytrauma centers" in Richmond, Va., Palo Alto, Calif., Minneapolis and Tampa, to treat veterans with traumatic brain or spinal cord injuries. According to the VA, 65 percent of the injuries seen from Afghanistan and Iraq have been from improvised explosive devices, land mines, blast and fragments. And of those injured, 60 percent suffer a debilitating brain injury.

"The Tampa program is very intense and geared to getting them to the most independent level possible," Gleason said. "When they come back here, if they need continued therapy, we follow up."

Helping a quadriplegic gain independence can take many hands. The Herricks have a new wheelchair ramp up to their front door. They are using a specially equipped van to make trips from Fort White to Tampa, while another van is outfitted for their needs. Their mobile home has been remodeled. Doors were widened, a hospital bed and a roll-in shower installed, a portable lift brought in to get Pete in and out of bed. Boxes of medical supplies and equipment stand in every corner.

"The goal is to bring these soldiers back home, not to send them to live out their lives in an institutional environment," Gleason said. "We work with them in making the huge transition from a medical center, where there is professional care 24/7, to home, where their families must help with any care that they need."

"A lot of role reversal goes on, so we have to make the family part of the transition."

Looking ahead

Herrick was released from Tampa's VA hospital on May 11, more than a year after he was wounded.

He and his wife marked the first anniversary of that date as a day of remembrance. And, they say, as a day of celebration.

"Pete has beaten all the odds, over and over again," Diana said.

"I dwell on the good memories," her husband said. "There's nothing like the feeling of being in a Humvee with your hands on a machine gun, flying down the highway at 60 or 70 miles an hour. I remember the friends that I made, and the overall experience."

Among the many steps forward Herrick has made is regaining the ability to breathe without a mechanical ventilator. That has given him back his voice, and he means to use it.

"When you hear you are paralyzed, you think it's one of the worst things in the world. I won't paint a rosy picture, and it's not fun. But I can speak, and if I can make people smile, it gives my life meaning."

Last January, they dug a gumball-sized hunk of metal shrapnel out of Herrick's neck. It's a measure of the man that he's had that nugget mounted on a gold chain.

"It represents victory for me," he said. "By all rights, that chunk should have killed me."

Herrick can wiggle his left thumb just a bit. He operates his specially designed wheelchair (and an adaptive PlayStation) by blowing out puffs of air. He's learning to use a computer without the use of his hands.

The family can't say enough about the help the VA has provided to them. Herrick admits, though, that if he'd come home unscathed, he probably would have tossed the information about his VA health care benefits in the trash.

"As a reservist, you get so many forms when you first get out and at the time, you're not thinking about what might develop when you're 55," he said.

He and his family are making plans for a new house that will be adapted to meet his needs. Gainesville builder Tommy Waters, with whom Herrick worked before he went to Iraq, is going to help to make that happen. The government will match up to \$50,000 that the family raises themselves.

Herrick puts a high value on the friends he made in his time in the military, and speaks to veterans' groups as often as he can.

"Family is family," he says, "but when you join the military, there's a camaraderie that is totally unmatched."

He says he worries about other veterans he's met . . . the ones whose wounds weren't physical and may not show.

"That's when I thank God I can speak, and it makes me feel better to talk about it."